

10 MISTAKES THAT PROPOSAL WRITERS MAKE AGAIN, AND AGAIN, AND AGAIN...

When I sit down to review a proposal, I often find myself making the same recommendations and corrections that I have made for other proposals. I have read over a thousand proposals written by more than a hundred companies. Sometimes it seems like everyone makes the same mistakes. When I present the results of my review sometimes the authors are embarrassed and I like to point out that these problems are common. These mistakes appear in all proposals, including those by the largest, most successful firms. By learning how to catch these mistakes and fix them, you can ensure that your proposals are better than the average seen by the typical evaluator.



MISTAKE #1: NOT BEING RFP COMPLIANT

It's pretty basic, but if you haven't complied with the RFP requirements, the customer may not read any further. So look at what you have written and ask yourself whether you can find the response to every RFP requirement in your proposal. If you can't find it, then you are not compliant. Sometimes all you need to do to fix it is to add the keywords used by the customer in the RFP to your proposal.

MISTAKE #2: MERELY COMPLYING WITH THE RFP

Does it offer something that the customer will want more than any competing offer? When you describe your offering, are you merely fulfilling the RFP requirements, or are you providing them with something better than the competition? Are you giving them a reason to want you? In addition, if the customer will be better off selecting your offering, have you explained why?

MISTAKE #3: NOT OPTIMIZING AGAINST THE EVALUATION CRITERIA

If you are writing a proposal in response to a written RFP with a formal evaluation process, ask yourself how the customer is going to score your bid. Will you achieve the maximum score possible? If not, you may need to add to your proposal, change the terminology, or change your points of emphasis so that they are better aligned with the evaluation criteria.

MISTAKE #4: FAILING TO PASS THE "SO WHAT?" TEST

When the customer reads "we are pleased to submit" or "our company was founded in 19xx," will the customer say "so what?" Look at everything you have written, and ask whether you would care if you were the customer reading it. If not, rewrite it so that it matters.

MISTAKE #5: NOT SAYING WHY THE CUSTOMER SHOULD SELECT YOU

Does what you have written clearly articulate why the customer should select you? The evaluator must look at competing proposals and select the best one. Does your proposal say why they should select you?

MISTAKE #6: NOT THINKING ABOUT WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO WIN

Does the proposal achieve what is necessary to win? Have you even asked yourself that question? What do you have to do or achieve in writing in order to win the proposal? Ask yourself whether the proposal you have written achieves those things. This should be your primary measure of the quality of your proposal.

MISTAKE #7: MAKING IT ALL ABOUT YOU

Is it all about you or is it all about the customer? Does every sentence start with "We" or the name of your company? That's a good sign that you're writing about yourself. Do you like hearing people talk about themselves? Instead you should talk about the results and how they will benefit or impact the customer. When you talk to a salesperson, you don't want him to

talk about himself, you want him to talk about how the purchase will impact you. This is true even when you have to talk about your qualifications. It's not your experience that matters, it's about how your experience will result in something beneficial to the customer. So make sure that everything you have written is about how the customer will be impacted or benefit, and not about you.

MISTAKE #8: STATING A UNIVERSAL TRUTH

Does it state a universal truth before presenting your approach? For example, does it say something like "Quality is absolutely vital to success. Therefore we..." or "According to the Council of Accepted Experts, quality is vital. Our approach..." Writers, especially those with technical backgrounds, sometimes like to put their claims in context or appeal to some accepted authority before they start writing. However, this is not good proposal writing. Instead, you should be showing that your approach delivers what you say is so important. It is much better to say that "Our approach delivers the quality that is vital to success by..." or "Our approach implements the recommendations of the Council of Accepted Experts by..."

MISTAKE #9: NOT OWNING THE RESULT

People often write in terms of things "happening" instead of saying things like "our approach delivers." You should take ownership of the results when you work on a project. Instead of "if you select us, we'll do the work, and you'll get the results" you should say that "if you select us you will benefit from the results we deliver" or "if you select us the results we deliver will have the following benefits for you..." The benefits to the customer are benefits that you provide. It's not bragging or ego. In proposal writing it's logical and necessary to show the link between your offering and the results. It's also not the way a lot of people normally write. You should review what you have written to see if you can rewrite any of the results so that you can take ownership of them.

MISTAKE #10: BUILDING TO THE FINISH

People want their claims to be credible. So they often carefully craft a proof that shows how each item leads up to their conclusion, which they deliver at the end. This is the exact reverse of the way you should write your proposals. People evaluating proposals do not want to have to read or puzzle through the whole thing to figure out what you are saying. Instead, you should tell them the conclusion you want them to reach first, then provide the supporting points that substantiate that conclusion. When reading your proposal, they should see a statement about the result or benefit you will offer them followed by how it will be achieved or delivered. Otherwise, they have no reason to keep reading.